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The Disclosure of Self in Robert Browning's Dramatic Monologues

"To read poems," wrote George Eliot in a review of Browning's work, "is often a substitute for thought; fine-sounding conventional phrases and the sing-song of verse demand no co-operation in the reader; they glide over the mind."[1] Contrary to Eliot's assessment, the aim of this paper is to show that by creating a disturbing persona characterized by a fluctuating self-consciousness which was distinctive not only of the fictional character but also of the listener/reader and the writer, Browning hampers uninvolved reading. In his dramatic monologues, the poet employs certain techniques to hide the real nature of his monologists, and the reader is forced painstakingly to gather the dispersed allusions, implications and insinuations so as to uncover the secrets of the speakers. Doubleness in Victorian poetry has been perceived by some critics as one of its defining characteristics.[2] Amongst the terms coined to describe it is E.D.H. Johnson's "dark companion": "The expressed content [of a poem] has a *dark companion*, its imaginative counterpart, which accompanies and comments on apparent meaning in such a way as to suggest ulterior motives."[3] Isobel Armstrong proposed a parallel concept "double companion."[4] However, the essential words, seem to me, to be the "imaginative counterpart" – since it is only in the imagination of the reader that the counterpart may arise on condition that the reader becomes involved in unraveling the text. The reader's

[1] *The Westminster Review* (January 1856). Quoted in Philip Davies, *The Victorians, The Oxford English Literary, p. History* vol. VIII (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p. 464.

[2] E.D.H. Johnson, *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1952), p. 217; Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 4.

[3] Johnson, *The Alien Vision*, p. 217.

[4] Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, pp. 4, 13.

active participation in the creation of the poem's "dark companion" ensures that the monologue achieves its full potential; otherwise it falls flat, or remains one-dimensional, as we shall see later with "Count Gismond."

Dramatic Lyrics (1842) and *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845) "contain nine or ten poems central to an understanding of Browning's"[5] work and perfection of one genre, the dramatic monologue, and that is why I focus on some poems from these collections to analyse the disclosure of self. The majority of those monologues explore a dark world, centering on what is abnormal and socially ostracized: murder ("My Last Duchess," "Porphyria's Lover"), heresy ("The Bishop Orders His Tomb," "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister"), hatred ("Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister"), treachery ("Count Gismond"), and madness ("Porphyria's Lover"). In his dramatic monologues Browning thrusts the audience *in medias res* – into a situation in which nothing is certain or clear and the reader has to find his or her way among misleading hints and false authorities. Consequently, a Victorian reader turning to, for instance, "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" from the broad and solid context of the realist novel, suddenly found some unlocated voice coming out of the midst of its own reality:

> Gr-r-r – there go, my heart's abhorrence!
> Water your damned flower-pots, do!
> If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,
> God's blood, would not mine kill you!
> What? Your myrtle-bush wants trimming?
> Oh, that rose has prior claims –
> Needs its leaden vase filled brimming?
> Hell dry you up with its flames! (ll.1–8)[6]

Browning offers no smooth introduction into the confession, no clue to where it is coming from, only a challenge to confront the meaning of this colloquial harangue, implicitly demanding that, as contemporary critic R.H. Hutton put it:

> The whole must be fairly grasped before any of the "component parts" are intelligible; the component parts, indeed, being little more than diminutive wholes, too diminutive to be clearly

[5] Stefan Hawlin, *The Complete Critical Guide to Robert Browning* (London and New York: Routledge 2006), p. 60.

[6] R. Browning, *The Major Works*, ed. A. Roberts (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), p. 108.

> legible until you have seen the whole, whence you go back to the component parts again with a key to their meaning that at last gradually deciphers them.[7]

Readers have to grope in the dark, wade through almost the entire poem, before they can discover what it begins from – a monk seeking the damnation of a colleague. Although "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" is an impressive parade of the tricks of the trade of the generic features of the genre Browning was to become known for, still it is possible to find a "key" to borrow Hutton's metaphor, to ordering the dislocated chunks of the story. More challenging, however, seem to me those monologues that elude disentanglement and remain puzzling to the end.

Browning experimented with the form of his poems, a fact which is mirrored in the hybrid title under which he republished the above-mentioned collections *Dramatic Lyrics* (as they appeared in the Cambridge edition of 1895). They constituted the poet's endeavour to transgress the limits of petrified literary genres of the dramatic and the lyric.[8] It involved a variety of techniques and strategies that prove to be far from haphazard, and foreshadow a development that was to become a mark of the genre a century later.[9] That he was aware of the relative novelty of such an experiment is clearly manifest in a short preface he wrote to the volume, where he articulated his uncertainty as to the nature of his new collection of poems and the "manner" he adopts there: "Such poems, as the majority in this volume [*Dramatic Lyrics*] might also come properly enough, I suppose, under the head of Dramatic Pieces; being, though often Lyric in expression, always Dramatic in principle."[10]

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[7] R.H. Hutton, *Essays Theological and Literary* (1871). Quoted in Davies, *The Victorians*, p. 462.

[8] Cf. Randa Abou-Bakr, "Browning neither sought to explain his paradoxical title nor to defy prevalent taste. He simply presented his collection with some explanations as to the nature of the poetic endeavour he saw himself undertaking there." Abou-Bakr, "R. Browning's 'Dramatic Lyrics': Contribution to a Genre," *Journal of Comparative Poetics* (2001), http://www.highbeam.com (accessed August 12, 2007).

[9] Cf. Abou-Bakr, "R. Browning's 'Dramatic Lyrics'."

[10] R. Browning, *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Browning* (Cambridge: CUP, 1895), p. 163. Quoted in William Clyde De Vane, *A Browning Handbook* (London: J. Murray, 1955), p. 96.

Dramatic Monologue

The dramatic monologue as a protean and innovative poetic convention has been since Browning's time analysed extensively, though in his lifetime it was not yet a genre with distinctive characteristics. It has come to acquire definite boundaries and clear-cut attributes in modern criticism. Robert Langbaum's discussion of the genre is generally accepted to be the classic one, so let us briefly follow his terminology.[11] The dramatic monologue has brought attention to the persona, which embodies the conflict outside (with the external world) and inside (with its alter ego), as well as to the immediacy of the critical situation out of which the monologue issues. Other presences in the poem also acquire importance, such as the figure of the silent addressee, who coalesces sometimes with the implied listener or reader, and at other times overlaps with the speaker's alter ego.[12] All definitions of the genre see it as combining two different attitudes towards the speaker, variously specified by different critics: as sympathy and judgement, identification and irony or sympathy and detachment. Langbaum argues that Browning's use of irony generates a tension between sympathy and judgement in the readers' responses to his monologists. If there were no sympathy it would be a comic or satiric poem; if there were no judgement (or irony) we would have a lyric, in which the emotion is attributed to the poet himself.[13] The extent of sympathy and judgement only rarely is in equilibrium; more frequently the scales are tipped, even to an almost complete disappearance of one of them. For instance, at one extreme there is the "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," where one might at first feel that the speaker is displayed for our mere contempt (though in fact such a reading would weaken the poem: it is only because we can identify – disclose, above all, in ourselves – the emotion of being infuriated by the foibles of a no doubt respected colleague we meet or work with, that the experience of reading this poem is so powerful). And at the other extreme, there is "Pictor Ignotus." "This speaker seems totally aware, as capable as author or reader of knowing himself; so that

[11] R. Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1963).

[12] Cf. Abou-Bakr, "R. Browning's 'Dramatic Lyrics'."

[13] Laurence Lerner explains why "judgement" is equated with "irony": "since no one speaks except the created character, the only way the poet can convey judgement is by implying an ironic distance between himself and the speaker." L. Lerner, "Browning's Painters," in *Yearbook of English Studies* (2006), http://www.highbeam.com (accessed August 3, 2007).

by one criterion he is the perfect subject for a poem about himself, but by another he is totally unsuited for it, since there can be no humour at his expense, no shifting into and out of his awareness of himself. Because he knows as much as we know, there is no irony."[14] In contrast to the Spanish monk, he could have written the poem himself.[15]

The majority of the poems in these two volumes are neither purely dramatic nor purely lyrical, but incorporate both features in various proportions. They are lyrical since they follow the principal rules of the genre, they introduce the thoughts and inner feelings and conflicts of the "poetic I." Yet the poems are also dramatic because they are voiced by characters, emphasizing a conflict – whether internal or with the outside world – and they often aim at the presentation of critical situations and, above all, a literary persona.[16] In the mid nineteenth century the persona became something different. A creation at once personal and impersonal, stressing at once closeness and aloofness, absence and presence, it came to stand for that very role of mediator between what is lyrical and what is dramatic. Ralph Rader characterizes the difference between eighteenth or early nineteenth century dramatic lyrics (such as Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale") and dramatic monologues by stating that in the latter: "the reader must imagine the speaker as an outward presence, as we in our bodies register others in their bodies, from the outside in, whereas in the dramatic lyric we are imaginatively conflated with the speaker, understanding him from the inside out, seeing with his eyes and speaking with his voice as if on our own behalf."[17]

Alan Sinfield, drawing upon the idea of the "feint" developed by Käte Hamburger in her exploration of fictional narrators, defines dramatic monologues as "first-person poems where the speaker is indicated not to be the poet."[18] He makes the distinction between a first-person lyric,

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[14] Lerner, "Browning's Painters."

[15] Or could he? A different interpretation is possible: that the apparent self-knowledge is a contrivance to keep the truth at bay from himself. Cf. R.D. Altick, for whom the pictor is a totally unreliable narrator. R.D. Altick, *Writers, Readers and Occasions: Selected Essays on Victorian Literature and Life* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1989), p. 32.

[16] By its mere presence, the persona is not an indication of the dramatic. The Elizabethan or Metaphysical poets did not always speak in their own voices about their own predicament. They constituted personae in their own right. They were, however, not dramatic but lyric personae, i.e. personae that do not have autonomous existence away from their creator, and are not the creation (and recreation) of conflict. The persona was then a literary pose.

[17] Ralph Rader, "Notes on Some Structural Varieties and Variations in Dramatic 'I' Poems and Their Theoretical Implications," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 3 (1984), p. 104.

[18] Alan Sinfield, *Dramatic Monologue* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 42.

where the reader is given "the illusion at least of direct access to the experiencing poet" and the third-person narrative which posits at least two levels of person: the one described and the one describing. The dramatic monologue, he suggests, "lurks provocatively between these two forms."[19] "Dramatic monologue feigns because it pretends to be something other than what it is: an invented speaker masquerades in the first-person which customarily signifies the poet's voice."[20] Thus the speaker of a dramatic monologue is never the homogeneous poetic self of the pure lyric, which is why the convention is now regarded as permitting various positionings of the speaking subject with respect to the author.[21]

It was one of Browning's basic achievements in *Dramatic Lyrics* to create such personae. Other techniques used by him to compose the unique nature of the poems are his handling of the mixture of genres, voices and tones. I would like, however, to concentrate on one particular rhetorical figure he uses to create the personae and to render action and conflict in an indirect manner, namely irony. Irony is a pivotal ingredient in the dramatic monologues which Browning employs to camouflage the true identity of his monologists. His characters are often projecting one image of themselves, yet, through the ironic structure of the poem and the distance it imposes, they are revealed to readers in a way that contradicts their self-image. "My Last Duchess" is probably the best known example. The Duke projects an image of himself as a connoisseur of art, a grand, sophisticated representative of the Italian Renaissance. The method of allowing the character to speak for himself, apparently unmediated by the poet, immerses the readers in his world, his mindset, his view of things. From one point of view, we might understand the monologist (and even side with him) because of how fully we are exposed to his personality, the persuasion of voice and manner of speaking. We see with his eyes.[22] From another viewpoint, irony acts

[19] Sinfield, *Dramatic Monologue*, p. 24.

[20] Sinfield, *Dramatic Monologue*, p. 25.

[21] Cf. Glennis Byron, *Dramatic Monologue* (New York: Routledge 2003), p. 19.

[22] Cf. Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience*, p. 83. Langbaum's higly influential approach, accentuating the sympathizing role of the reader, has been questioned. Cynthia Scheinberg undermined the all-too-easy universalized concept of "we," "the readers" who supposedly "suspend moral judgement because we prefer to participate in the Duke's power and freedom" (Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience*, p. 83). Scheinberg asks to which "we" does Langbaum refer? Many readers may find it very hard to accept Langbaum's readerly capacity for sympathy with the Duke. The difficulty, according to the feminist critic, lies in in Langbaum's assumption of some universal reader who is implicitly male. A woman reader's challenging patriarchy might preclude any possibility of sympathizing with "the power and freedom" which leads to turning a living woman

to distance us from the speaker, reintroduces our moral awareness and makes us judge the speaker for who he really is. Readers deduce a jealous psychopath, eaten up with insecurity, a sadist who reduces people to objects.[23] However, what seems fascinating is that these two processes take place simultaneously. The irony of the monologue continually undermines the Duke's perspective and awakens the readers's critical faculties. "While the Duke tells us of his reasonableness, we see his irrationality; while he implies his generosity to his first wife, we see his blind desire to control another human being within the confines of his own will."[24]

Wayne Booth, analyzing the nature of Browning's irony, defines it as "stable irony" because he believes that as readers we are always able to decode it easily. We can be sure that "we know exactly what the poet intends us to think of a particular character because – like all stable ironists – Browning expects us to decode what his characters say in the context of moral norms that we can be certain we share with him.[25] This seems to me too broad a generalization; it fits neatly when we think of "My Last Duchess" or "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," but falls flat when we try applying it to the secret of "Count Gismond." This poem provoked debates of interpretation depending on the extent of the irony adopted.

"Count Gismond"

In the original volume of *Dramatic Lyrics* "Count Gismond" was coupled with "My Last Duchess" under a different title of "Italy and France."[26] It would be possible to conclude from this that "Count Gismond" is simply intended as a study of virtue and happy marriage in contrast to the tragedy of the Duchess of Ferrara. Such a non-ironic reading would indicate "an almost embarrassing celebration of the good, the wise, the religiously true."[27] Nonetheless, let us start with such a non-ironic

into an inanimate portrait (C. Scheinberg, "Recasting 'sympathy and judgement': Amy Levy, Women Poets, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue," *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 35 (1997), pp. 173–192. Quoted in Byron, *Dramatic Monologue*, p. 23).

[23] Hawlin, *The Complete Critical Guide*, p. 63.

[24] Hawlin, *The Complete Critical Guide*, p. 64.

[25] W. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974). Quoted in Hawlin, *The Complete Critical Guide*, p. 65.

[26] De Vane, *A Browning Handbook*, pp. 94, 99–100.

[27] Hawlin, *The Complete Critical Guide*, p. 77.

reading only to ruminate further on the possibilities of subverting this interpretation.

The persona in "Count Gismond" is the Countess Gismond, happily married with two sons. She recollects the traumatic events of the day her marriage began to her lady-in-waiting, Adela. She was an orphaned maiden at the French court, when on some tournament day she was to be crowned as the May queen, a courtesy title. Unknown to her, her two jealous cousins had conspired to have a certain Count Gauthier accuse her before the whole court of fornication with himself. This duly happens. She is unprotected, being an orphan, with no one to stand up for her. Yet suddenly Count Gismond steps forward to defend her honour. He throws down his gauntlet to Gauthier, defeats him and then drags him in front of the lady and the crowd to recant his lie. Afterwards, Gismond carries the lady away to the "South" to marriage and happiness with himself. This straightforward reading takes for granted that the poem exists in a world of high chivalric romance. Within this frame the protagonist is perceived as a Browningesque hero of the chivalric tradition, "equipped to see virtue through evil appearances,"[28] and the monologist's confession is accepted at face value.

However, there exists the possibility of a quite different interpretation of the Countess Gismond's narrative, one which sabotages the reading outlined above, but only on condition that we allow for ironic distance between the writer, the reader and the persona. In this interpretation the lady is a cunning schemer who has narrowly escaped evil repute. The speaker employs several techniques to mold the past so that the audience receives a favourable portrait of her. One of them is using pious expressions and references to the Bible. She begins her story with a conventional religious formula, as if she were starting a prayer, which is to throw positive light on herself: "Christ God who savest man, save most / Of men Count Gismond who saved me!"[29] Indeed, she is to use that method of intertwining the main narrative with pious phrases ("Gauthier's dwelling-place / God lighten! May his soul find grace!" (119–120)) and with stock Christian truths ("I felt quite sure that God had set / Himself to Satan; who would spend / A minute's mistrust on the end?" (70–72)) many times to inculcate the listener's (and the readers') mind(s) with the idea of her religiosity.

Another frame which she imposes on her story is the opposition of an innocent and defenceless victim and a cunning oppressor ("when he

[28] De Vane, *A Browning Handbook*, p. 100.

[29] Browning, *The Complete Poetical Works*, p. 103, lines 1–2. Further references to this poem will be marked in the text with the line number in parentheses.

[Gauthier] struck at length / My honour, 'twas with all his strength" (ll.5–6)). Thus she consistently undermines the position of Gauthier by portraying him from the very beginning as a schemer. Next, prior to outlining the details of her story to her friend and confidante Adela, she informs her that Gauthier definitely carefully pre-planned the time, the place and the company of her denunciation (this is repeated within the two initial stanzas).

Although the lady-speaker strives to weave a well-knit tapestry portraying herself as innocent and unaware of the plots hatched against her, still the reader might perceive some loose warps which do not fit to the queenly pattern of the embroidery. One such extraneous thread in the fabric of her narrative can be discerned in the *seemingly* generous description of her cousins' appearance:

> They, too, so beauteous! Each a queen
> By virtue of her brow and breast;
> Not needing to be crowned, I mean
> As I do. (19–22)

First, however, she almost imperceptibly interweaves the hackneyed phrase of God's will, ("God makes, or fair or foul, our face") thus establishing a divine basis (and justification) of the difference between her countenance and her cousins', wrapping that carefully in the shimmering paper of God's verdict, as if these are not her words, her opinions. This makes her courteous admission of her cousins' beauty sound all the more false.

> I thought they loved me, did me grace
> To please themselves; 'twas all their deed;
> *God makes, or fair or foul, our face;*
> If showing mine so caused to bleed
> My cousins' hearts, they should have dropped
> A word, and straight the play had stopped. (13–18; emphasis added)

On top of that she adds that since they were so charming (yet the readers remember that its not true), there was no need to crown them. In that complicated interplay of ulterior asides the persona's true identity is slowly disclosed. Another such revealing detail can be traced in her attitude towards the things that happen at court:

> If showing mine [face] so caused to bleed
> My cousins' hearts, they should have dropped

> A word, and straight *the play* had stopped. (16–18; emphasis added)

The word "play" may refer to her flirting with other courtiers which could have been noticed by her relatives and since they remained silent, the lady thought it was approved of. There must have been some tension, though, on the morning before the tournament for the cousins could not look her in the eye (they were "glancing sideways" (24)). Their stillness seemed to emerge from the fact that they considered it to be too grave a transgression for an unchaste woman to be crowned the virtuous May queen.

Another factor the lady brings into play to strengthen her image as a blameless maiden is her status of an orphan that falls in line with the initial opposition of a victim and oppressor. Making use of her orphaned state the persona adroitly remodels the significance of the festival day:

> And they could let me take my state
> And foolish throne amid applause
> Of all come there to celebrate
> My queen's-day--Oh I think the cause
> Of much was, they forgot no crowd
> Makes up for parents in their shroud! (37–42)

The image that the Countess Gismond wants to imprint in the listener's mind is that she remained indifferent to the exiting preparations for the tournament; she let others do things to her which the readers know definitely is a far cry from the surge of emotion she experienced on that day: "That miserable morning saw / Few half so happy as I seemed" (9–10)). Nevertheless, we are to believe that it was the cousins' intrigue to crown her to compensate for the loss of her parents; as if she did not enjoy being the chosen lady, as if she had not willingly participated in the occasion.

While telling the story to her confidante, the Countess is fluent and loquacious, particularly at the beginning, when she describes the double-dealings of her cousins and Count Gauthier. However, when it comes to recounting the very moment of Gauthier's denunciation, she founders:

> […] 'twas time I should present
> The victor's crown, but… there, 't will last
> No long time… the old mist again
> Blinds me as then it did. (44–47)

The cause of her collapsing might be twofold: the overt one is the wave of emotion: the force of reminiscence is so powerful that it checks her glib presentation of the past. She feels giddy, literally undercut, similarly to the day which seemed to be the end of the world for her; the awareness of the odium of disgrace which she could have fallen into makes her stagger. The other reason for the unforeseen interruption in the prolix flow of her narrative (it is a covert one and can be taken into consideration by the reader only on subsequent readings of the monologue), is her accidentally looking through the window. She recognizes her husband and two sons and the memory of the fundamental lie she built her marriage on comes to her mind and silences for a moment her well-versed relation. This explanation of her temporal collapsing is corroborated by the fact that she can proceed with her story only when she makes sure that her husband is out of earshot: "See! Gismond's at the Gate, in talk / With his two boys: I can proceed (49–50)." This situation repeats itself (thus supporting the presented explication) at the end of the poem, when the lady's confession is abruptly terminated due to her husband's unexpected arrival.

Another technique consistently used by the persona to assert her status as an innocent object of a fiendish intrigue (by no means a person acting) is to present herself as prey and Gauthier as hunter. This imagery, founded on the initial opposition of the victim-oppressor, is crucial since it acquires an astonishing twist towards the end of the monologue (which I will discuss below).

When she was openly denounced for fornication, she felt as if her world was to fall apart at the seams, and once Gismond stepped forward she felt strong again. Strangely enough, the thing that resuscitates her self-esteem is not his prowess or her religious belief that good conquers evil (a belief she initially professed to be unshakeable) but the fact that Gismond had no doubts about her chastity:

> *This glads me most*, that I enjoyed
> The heart of the joy, with my content
> *In watching Gismond unalloyed*
> *By any doubt of the event.* (79–82; emphasis added)

To feel strong again she must have an ally; to rise up in the world and regain her position she has to gather some adherents – the first one was Gismond, the next should be the listener, and finally the reader…

The fatally wounded Gauthier, forced by his adversary to recant his lie, utters an apparently straightforward confession: "I have lied / To God and her" (100–101). On the face of it, he seems to acknowledge

his duplicity, yet the utterance discloses different meaning on closer examination. First and foremost, Gauthier does not admit lying to all the courtiers assembled at the tournament (and for that matter to Gismond); what he asserts is lying only to God and to the lady. With this declaration, he does not recant his earlier indictment: " 'Shall she whose body I embraced / A night long, queen it in the day?'" (58–59) uttered in public. He might have during that night promised the lady discretion and secrecy, hence by pronouncing openly their liaison he lied to her. Secondly, by committing fornication he could have broken the vow of chastity that was taken by many knights at that time, so he may have lied to God as well. Still, this does not mean that he lied to the tournament's audience (and to Gismond) in revealing their illicit affair. This nuanced reading of the pythian vocalization slips the mind of the righteous knight who, satisfied with Gauthier's disclaimer, carries the damsel away to his castle in the South.

Another indication of the lady's hypocrisy can be traced in the descriptions she gives of her sons:

> Our elder boy has got the clear,
> Great brow, tho' when his brother's black
> Full eye shows scorn, it… (121–123)

And we will never know how the elder son's facial expression alters at that particular moment and probably resembles Gauthier's countenance. The supposition that there is something undisclosed and secret about the parentage of her elder boy is strengthened by the fact that she cannot continue talking about the changes on his face within her husband's earshot. What can be so troubling or shameful that she cannot talk about it openly?

The last straw, however, which, it seems to me, undisputably, proves the speaker's falsity and lays bare her methods of dissimulation, is the Countess's final lie to her husband about the topic of the conversation with her friend, Adela. There is no pause, no stumbling, no single moment of hesitation or embarrassment on her part when her husband enters the room; on the contrary, she smoothly jumps to a completely different subject:

> Our elder boy has got the clear,
> Great brow, tho' *when his brother's black*
> *Full eye shows scorn, it…* Gismond here?
> And have you brought my tercel back?
> *I was just telling Adela*
> *How many birds it struck since May.* (121–126; emphasis added)

The readers are completely taken aback by the instantaneousness of her reaction – normally one would suppose at such an almost *in flagrante* situation (on the point of confession) some discomposure or awkwardness on the lady's part, some signs of anxiety whether her husband has overheard some snatches of that conversation or not – in this case, however, nothing like that happens. Quite to the contrary, she is self-possessed and shrewdly alters the theme of their parleying like a trained plotter. Where could she have acquired such skill? Probably at the court in her youth, where it must have been difficult to cover up a love affair so as to avoid the prying eyes of the other ladies or courtiers.

Furthermore there is the significance of the question she poses to her husband and the image it (re)introduces of a hawk (hunter) and little birds (prey). If we treat it just as a conversation filler, serving as wool to be pulled over the spouse's eyes, it can be all too easily brushed aside as a subtle, yet irrelevant tactic to exclude Gismond from the subject of the reminiscence. But once again the thing is not what it seems to be. That apparently immaterial remark turns out to be the most illuminating metaphor describing in a nutshell her bearings in life and marriage. Nowadays she keeps a hawk trained to catch quarry and the thing to boast about is the number of birds it killed. Now there's a game on top of a game. Not only do the readers perceive her as the hawk's owner but also they begin to understand her role as a grand schemer who has pulled the strings of the knight (her future husband) to strike the victim (the indiscrete lover). Hence in the end, that final remark of hers grants the readers a new perspective that we could only sense throughout the poem and that is of a huntress and the others as tools or victims of her scheming. Another detail supporting such a reading is the temporal clue, namely this hunt takes place in May, the month of her prenuptial experience of disgrace and unexpected victory. Now it is the time of her supremacy, her sole control over the past and the present, and thus over other human beings.

Although Ian Jack shoves the ironic reading of "Count Gismond" aside as "a view which would surely have astonished Browning,"[30] I, not presuming to know Browning's reaction, would emphasise the poem's ironic structure as a means by which the dramatic persona can be unveiled by the readers.[31]

[30] Quoted in Hawlin, *The Complete Critical Guide*, p. 166. A similar view is held by Sidney Coulling in an important article entitled "The Duchess of Ferrara and the Countess Gismond: Two Sides of the Andromeda Myth," *Studies in Browning and His Circle XIV* (1986), pp. 66–84, in which he tries to prove that the interpretative hinge of "Count Gismond" is its ironic dialogue with "My Last Duchess."

[31] Readings which accentuate revelation of character are based on the presupposition that there exists a character which might be disclosed through the monologue. There

In conclusion, the concept of the "double poem" might account for the sense of division or splitting which is linked to dramatic irony. The speaker's meaning can almost always be distinguished from the poem's meaning, or as Langbaum puts it "the meaning of the dramatic monologue is in disequilibrium with what the speaker reveals and understands. […] We understand, if not more, at least something other than the speaker understands."[32] Monologues which feature dramatic irony certainly indicate the presence of a double-voiced discourse, "two differently oriented speech acts within the same words."[33] This led critics to regard the dramatic monologue as an anticipatory example of Bakhtin's dialogism. Yet it seems to me that Johnson's or Armstrong's terms "dark" or "double companion" are more useful because they do not stress the straightforward opposition between voices (which is the tendency of dialogism); rather they perceive the utterance as both subject and object, permitting the poet "to explore expressive psychological forms simultaneously as psychological conditions and as constructs."[34] Thus Browning's dramatic monologues stimulate the readers' minds rather than lulling them into the drowsy passivity of skimming over the text.

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has been a postmodern attack on the idea of the autonomous subject, holding that the self of the dramatic monologue "is the most elaborate illusion of the text, the product of a speech act and not its producer." H.F. Tucker, "Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric," in C. Hosek et al. (eds), *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1985), p. 243.

[32] Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experince*, p. 146. Cf. also H.H. Anniah Gowda, *Dramatic Poetry. From Mediaeval to Modern Times* (Madras-Bombay-Calcutta: Macmillan, 1972), p. 227.

[33] Byron, *The Dramatic Monologue*, p. 16.

[34] Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 13.

Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech

Odsłanianie siebie w monologach dramatycznych Roberta Browninga

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest wykazanie, że poprzez stworzenie podmiotu lirycznego o płynnej samoświadomości Robert Browning wyklucza możliwość niezaangażowanej lektury. W swoich monologach dramatycznych poeta wykorzystuje strategie ukrywające prawdziwą naturę autorów monologów, pozostawiając czytelnikowi zebranie rozsianych aluzji, implikacji i insynuacji w celu odkrycia tajemnic mówców. Przedmiotem analizy są utwory *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) oraz *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845),

stanowiące szczytowe osiągnięcie monologu jako gatunku poetyckiego. Większość monologów Browninga porusza ponure kwestie morderstwa, herezji, nienawiści, zdrady i szaleństwa, i to właśnie na ich tle czytelnik zmuszony jest do znalezienia własnej drogi pośród zwodniczych i niepewnych wskazówek. Centralnym punktem monologów jest podmiot liryczny rozdarty podwójnym konfliktem zarówno ze światem zewnętrznym, jak i zmaganiami z własnym alter ego. Rozdarcie to kamufluje jeden z głównych zabiegów stylistycznych monologów, a mianowicie ironię, której zastosowanie generuje często wewnętrznie sprzeczny obraz podmiotu. Owa dwugłosowość monologów Browninga bywa w ujęciu krytycznym postrzegana jako odległa zapowiedź rozważań na temat wewnętrznej dialogowości języka.

Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech

Dévoiler soi-même dans les monologues dramatiques de Robert Browning

Résumé

L'objectif de l'article est de démontrer qu'à travers la création du sujet lyrique dont l'autoconscience est floue, Robert Browning exclue la possibilité de lecture non engagée. Dans ses monologues dramatiques le poète emploie des stratégies voilant la vraie nature des auteurs des monologues, en laissant au lecteur de réunir des allusions, implications et insinuations éparpillées pour découvrir des secrets des parleurs. Les objets de l'analyse sont les oeuvres *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) et *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), qui constituent le couronnement du monologue comme genre poétique. La plupart des monologues de Browning abordent des questions sombres de meurtres, hérésie, haine, trahison et folie, et c'est sur ce fond que le lecteur est forcé de trouver son propre chemin parmi des indications trompeuses et incertaines. Le point central des monologues et le sujet lyrique déchiré par un double conflit premièrement avec le monde extérieur et ensuite avec son propre alter ego. Ce déchirement est camouflé par un des procédés stylistiques principaux des monologues, à savoir l'ironie, dont l'application génère souvent une image, intérieurement contradictoire, du sujet. Cette double voix des monologues de Browning est perçue dans la perspective critique comme un signe précurseur des réflexions sur le dialogisme intérieur de la langue.